

ON THE USE OF ETHER AS AN INTOXICANT

IN THE NORTH OF IRELAND

BY

HARRY NAPIER [DRAPER, F.C.S.

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THE number of cases recorded by writers on therapeutics and toxicology, in which ether in its fluid form has been continuously used as a nervous stimulant is very small. Instances are quoted by Pereira (*Mat. Med.*, vol. ii., p. 1965), where it was habitually taken in large doses, but in these it was employed for the relief of physical suffering. One is that of the chemist, Briquet, who took a pint of ether daily, to alleviate the intense agony caused by the intestinal inflammation of which he was dying. Another is that of a gentleman who was in the habit of taking about two ounces daily for the relief of asthma.

An example of the use of ether as an intoxicant is given by Taylor (*On Poisons*, 1st ed., p. 435). In this case, a young man was in the habit of taking large doses of the fluid, which he obtained at different druggists' shops. Its effect was so like alcoholic intoxication that he was brought before a magistrate on a charge of drunkenness. What real ground for the belief there may be, I know not, but there is a widely diffused popular impression that ether is used as a stimulant by women of the higher ranks of society. The existence of the practice was, for example, alluded to in the *Daily Telegraph*, only a few weeks since.

But neither these isolated cases of the habitual use of ether, —cases, too, in which the habit has, without doubt, had its

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origin in the medicinal use of the stimulant, nor the floating idea that there are fair consumers of *Hoffmann's anodyne* and *perles d'ether*, for whom ether has never been prescribed, quite prepare one for the discovery that there is in the northern part of Ireland a number of people who, forswearing alcohol, supply its place with ether; a race to whom ether is what koumiss is to a Kalmuck, ava to a South Sea Islander, absinthe to a certain class of Frenchmen, or gin and whiskey to their more immediate neighbours. It is not the medicinal consumption of opium which rules its price, nor the surgical employment of chloroform which makes its production a special manufacture, and not Dr. Collis Browne himself could have anticipated the tide of popular favour which would have set in for his palatable combination of both these anodynes. These are things not difficult to understand, for human nature is impatient of pain, and grasps at any nepenthe which presents itself in pleasing guise; but that any condition of things should arise which should take a nauseous fluid like ether from the pharmacopœia and the laboratory of the chemist, and make it the recognised stimulant of any set of men, and that with them it should supplant alcohol—that they should take ‘nips’ of ether morning, noon, and night, as they would whiskey, and—for anything shown to the contrary—drink good luck or ratify bargains in a glass of ether, was not a thing to look for, and is, perhaps, without parallel in the history of narcotic stimulants. The facts, nevertheless, are simply as I am about to state them. They rest upon the authority of a number of gentlemen who, in their respective capacities of physicians, clergymen, ether manufacturers, and druggists, have been applied to to furnish information on the subject, and I here wish to thank these gentlemen for their kindness in replying to the systematic series of questions addressed to them. My especial thanks are due to my friend, Dr. William

Frazer, who has spared no pains in the endeavour to obtain accurate information, and to the success of whose inquiries I am much indebted.

I should say, also, that my data having being collected from different parts of the North of Ireland, the result is to be taken as the mean of the information obtained and not as applying to any one locality.

The practice of ether drinking appears to be almost altogether confined to the counties of Londonderry, Antrim, and Tyrone; and the towns in which it most prevails are Draperstown, Maghera (Derry); Cookstown and Omagh (Tyrone). Belfast is the depot to which the ether manufacturers of Dublin, Edinburgh, and Glasgow send the supplies which thence find their way into the smaller towns.

So far as I can learn, the introduction of the practice dates from about five years since, and it is curious in its very origin. While it is only right to say that one of my correspondents attributes it to habit acquired by the medicinal use of the drug in cases where alcoholic stimulants were contra-indicated, and another to the desire of 'getting drunk more cheaply,' I have not found either of these theories to bear examination, and my authorities are, with these two exceptions, unanimous in the opinion that ether drinking is a consequence of the laudable efforts made by the Roman Catholic clergy in inducing their flocks to abstain from whiskey. The consumers of ether are said to be nearly all Catholics, and to belong chiefly to the class of small farmers, though the habit certainly prevails among mill hands and other operatives.

The usual quantity of ether taken at one time is from two to four drachms, and this dose is repeated twice, thrice, or even four and six times daily. It is taken unmixed with water; indeed, its very slight solubility in that fluid¹ would make this

¹ A pint of water dissolves but two ounces of ether.

a useless precaution ; but the usual practice is, to take first a mouthful of water, then the dose of ether, and again a mouthful of water.

The intoxication produced by ether resembles that of alcohol, but is much more rapidly produced, and is more evanescent. The ether seems to be eliminated entirely by the lungs, as the urine has no odour of it ; and, on the other hand, the breath of the ether drinker always affords ample evidence of his addiction to the habit. I am credibly informed that at the fair of Draperstown—which appears to be the paradise of ether drinkers—the prevalent smell is not, as at country fairs, of pigs, tobacco-smoke, or of unwashed human beings, but of *ether*.

I have not been able to learn that, apart from the moral ill effects common to all excitants and intoxicants, the habitual use of ether brings in its train any peculiar evils, and although it would be wrong to draw a conclusion from completely negative evidence, I am disposed to believe that the votaries of ether incur less danger from the habit than ordinary dram-drinkers ; and there are two good reasons for this belief. If we assume that there is nothing specifically injurious in the action of ether, it will readily be admitted that, having a definite chemical composition, and not being very liable to adulteration with other fluids, it must be an improvement upon the sophisticated alcoholic potations, which, with these people, it has replaced. Again, the affinity of ether for water is so slight¹ that dehydration of the mucous tissue of the alimentary canal, and that apeptic action which so well mark the difference between the effect of ardent spirits and of alcohol in the form of unbranded wine, cannot be evils attending its ingestion.

All the ether consumed in this way is that which is technically termed ‘methylated,’ that is, prepared from methylated spirit. It may be with some reason supposed that the action of ether

¹ 1000 volumes of ether dissolve but 10 volumes of water.

thus obtained upon the human economy cannot be predicated from the known action of ether made from pure alcohol. But although the gaseous oxide of methyl is soluble in ethylic oxide, this body can be present but in small quantity in the ether of commerce,¹ and, though its exact therapeutic action is unknown, can affect the action of the ether but slightly. Indeed, by far the greater proportion of the ether which has been used medicinally for many years past has been 'methylated,' and is so at present; and though to any one whose senses of smell and taste are fairly practised, the difference in taste and odour of pure and methylated ether are apparent, the quantity of hydrocarbon compounds producing this difference must be exceedingly minute, for they afford no sensible residue on the evaporation of even a considerable quantity of the ether. And, indeed, as the hydrocarbons have a boiling point considerably above that of water, and as the ether of commerce distils at about 105° Fahr., they would evidently *à priori* contaminate it but slightly. These hydrocarbons might be, perhaps, considered to bear somewhat the same relation to the effect of the ether, as the fusel-oil and fat-acid ethers of whiskey and brandy do to the effect of their alcohol.

If methylated spirit had never been introduced and ether had not been made from it, ether could scarcely have become a popular stimulant in the north of Ireland. And it may not be without interest to look at this fact for a moment, from an Inland Revenue point of view. Methylated spirit is absolutely exempt from duty, and especial legislation provides against the profitable exercise of chemical ingenuity in rendering it potable. But the authorities concerned never could have foreseen that the cheap ether which is so great a boon to practical chemists would ever find a place in the shops of grocers and publicans.

¹ Methylated spirit contains but ten per cent. of wood spirit, which in its turn consists in part only of methylic alcohol.

The wholesale price of a pound of ether made from pure spirit is five shillings, but a pound of methylated ether is sold in Tyrone and Derry for one shilling and sixpence. As there are about seven and a half pounds in a gallon of commercial ether, a gallon costs eleven shillings and threepence. Now, if we assume the ordinary quantity taken at one time to average three drachms, and this quantity to be (in stimulant effect) the equivalent of half-a-glass of whiskey, we arrive at the result that three gallons of ether supply the place of ten gallons of whiskey, which, at 15⁰ under proof pay duty to the amount of £4, 5s., while the ether pays nothing. It is very difficult to arrive at any accurate idea of the extent to which ether is consumed in the north of Ireland. Omagh is said to take about 400 Winchester quarts (equal to 250 gallons) yearly, and one Dublin manufacturer has sent to Belfast at the rate of 4,000 gallons yearly. Now, if for the sake of illustration, this latter quantity be taken as the total consumption of the North, the excise suffers by the practice to the extent of £5,666 per annum. These figures must, however, fall immeasurably short of representing the total consumption. The excise authorities have, I understand, attempted to interfere, but of course, without success, as there is no present legal restriction affecting the sale of ether, whether pure or methylated.

This subject, too, cannot fail to be of interest to Insurance Companies, whose risks must be enormously increased by so dangerously inflammable a liquid being stored under the most unfavourable conditions, and handled by people so ignorant of its properties, as country spirit dealers must necessarily be.

Though I have put together all the facts which a careful consideration of the subject seemed to make the chief objects of inquiry, I have the disadvantage of not possessing personal experience—of not having visited an ether-drinking district. This deficiency I hope, ere long, to make good, but in the mean-

time, I trust that those of my readers who reside in such districts, will be induced to make public any facts or statistics which come within their knowledge.

I am indisposed at present to make any generalizations, but even at this early stage of the inquiry, it is impossible not to be struck with its forcible illustration of the fact that if men are deprived, or deprive themselves of any one form of nervous stimulant they will sooner or later replace it by another. And, in the words of Liebig, I would ask those who may be hastily disposed to look upon this practice of ether drinking as utterly vicious and harmful, first to inquire 'whether it depend upon sensual and sinful inclinations merely, that every people of the globe has appropriated some such means of acting on the nervous life; from the shores of the Pacific, where the Indian retires from life for days, in order to enjoy the bliss of intoxication with coca; to the Arctic regions, where Kamtschatdales and Koriakes prepare an intoxicating beverage from a poisonous mushroom.'

